

The Mystery at Woodford's

By WADSWORTH CAMP

Illustration by Arthur I. Keller

FORTY years ago, the great actor for whom Woodford's Theater was built died on the stage while playing his favorite rôle in "Coward's Fare." There is a superstition that his ghost, and that of his pet cat, haunt the theater. However, Arthur McHugh determines to revive "Coward's Fare," and chooses Richard Quaile to bring it up to date. Barbara Morgan is given the leading woman's part; and, to lend atmosphere, McHugh engages Dolly Timken, who played in the original cast, and Woodford's property-man, Mike Brady. Woodford's own part is given to Harvey Carlton. McHugh, Quaile, and Brady go to look over the theater. As McHugh is making a skeptical allusion to Woodford's ghost, the lights go out; and in the darkness they faintly hear footsteps crossing the stage, followed by the patter of a cat. The lighting system is found in good order, and McHugh is puzzled. Some days later, at a rehearsal, Carlton tells Quaile he has heard a story that evil will follow any attempt to play Woodford's rôle. He says he has received mysterious warnings; but he promises to see the thing through. As the play proceeds, the actors show nervousness, and Miss Timken feels the presence of a cat. At the moment in the play at which Woodford died, Carlton, in the middle of a speech, topples to the stage, dead. The coroner's verdict is, heart failure under emotional strain. The manager has a plain talk with his company, giving an opportunity to leave the production; all promise to stick. He engages Tyler Wilkins for the famous rôle. McHugh, who was once head of a detective agency, is convinced that there is a reasonable explanation of the happenings that pursue his revival of "Coward's Fare." He gets Quaile to promise to go alone to the theater the following night for an investigation. The playwright, going from McHugh's office to his rooms, is greeted by a faint tinkle of the telephone and a ghostly message: "Keep away. I prefer to play my part to empty seats." Quaile attempts to trace the call, but the telephone company insists there has been none. The far-away tinkle of the bell continues.

QUAILE conquered his repugnance. He entered the passage. He crossed the dark rooms to the lighted study, where the unnatural bell sound still quavered. He thrust his hand toward the telephone, then drew it back. The thought of exposing his senses twice to that incredible experience was abhorrent. He shrank from hearing again the unearthly voice that, claiming the dead Woodford as a source, had warned him away from the theater. On the other hand, the monotonous, wayward ringing placed inaction beyond his control. He stepped forward, gathering his determination.

The bell abruptly ceased. When he placed the receiver to his ear, central cut in with her curt demand:

"Number, please?"

"Sorry—a mistake," he muttered.

He hung up and, his hands in his pockets, looked about him helplessly. There was nothing to be gained by calling the exchange again. He had already been told there was no question: his 'phone had not been rung since noon. That fact destroyed his last hope of a rational explanation that McHugh, indulging in tactless humor, had made the call. Still he clung to the idea that McHugh might offer some interpretation.

WHILE he undressed, several things became clear to him. The unearthly ringing had evidently been timed for his return to an empty apartment; yet, as far as he could tell, no one had known of his visit to McHugh. Certainly no one could have guessed the arrangement he had made to spend to-morrow night in the old theater. It appeared equally obvious that whoever or whatever was responsible for the warning had resumed the ringing just long enough to ridicule his temerity in attempting to trace such a call—to convince him, as Carlton had been convinced, that it had indeed come from the air.

Quaile would not surrender to such madness, but, in spite of himself, his nerves remained taut. He tossed fretfully through long hours, aware that his sleep-

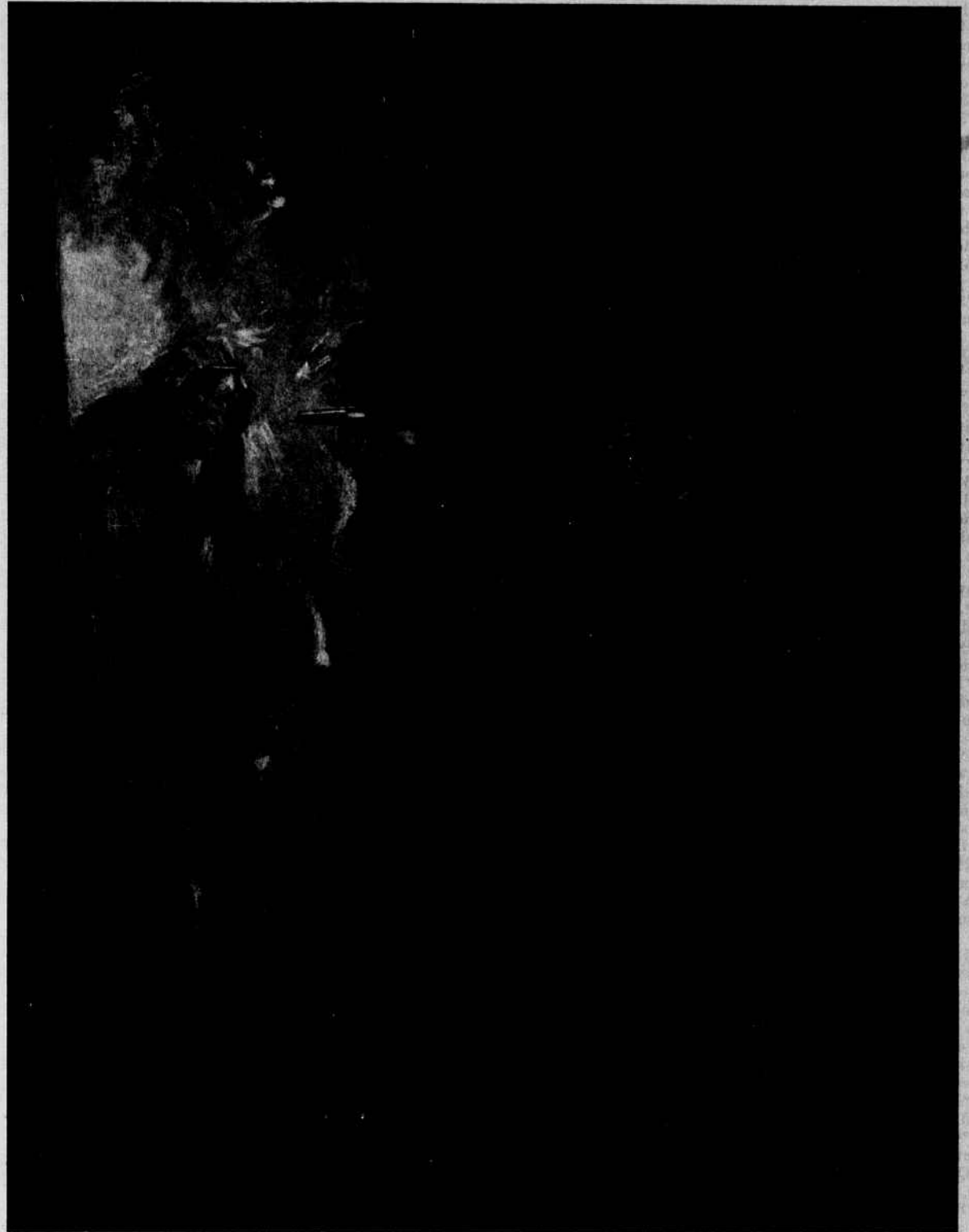
lessness was the worst possible preparation for the lonely vigil he had undertaken for the following night. Once he lighted his bed lamp and tried to read, but his mind revolted; yet during those restless hours the silence was unbroken by any unaccustomed sound. His wakefulness went for nothing. It was as if it had been forced upon him by some external cause—as another warning, as an undermining of his will for his formidable task.

With dawn he slept a little; but by eight o'clock he was awake, heavy-eyed and unrefreshed.

He breakfasted without appetite, and hurried to McHugh's office. He found the manager chewing, as usual, on a cold cigar.

"What hit you, Quaile?" McHugh asked, glancing up curiously. "Was it an accident or a party?"

"Neither," Quaile answered.



"Steadily the limping footsteps came nearer. Quaile raised the revolver. 'Now! Who are you?'"

He tried to hide his confusion behind a laugh.

"Only a warning—out of the air."

McHugh started.

"I mean I think I can tell you now just how Carlton got his fright."

McHugh took the cigar from between his teeth.

"The devil you can!" he exploded.

He sprang excitedly to his feet, waving his tortured cigar.

"You wouldn't mix yourself up with fortune-tellers, Quaile. Any warning you got can be traced."

Quaile shook his head. It had become clear enough that McHugh had no interpretation to offer.

"I haven't been near the spiritualists," he said, "but it isn't as simple as you think. Listen. I went straight home from here last night. The minute I unlocked my door, I heard a far-away

ringing. It was so unusual, it didn't occur to me at first it could be the telephone. But it was, and a voice as queer as the ringing came over the wire—warned me to keep away from the theater, said Woodford preferred to play his part to empty seats."

McHUGH paced the length of the room. An increasing excitement recorded itself in his face, grew almost to satisfaction.

"Something to go on at last," he cried. "I'll trace that call. I've good friends in the telephone company. I'll turn the whole corporation upside down. I'll lay you golden eagles to rubber dimes I get at that call."

"I pray you do," Quaile said fervently, "but I doubt if you've a chance. You see, I went through the thing—last night."

After a moment's frowning considera-